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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SKOPJE 000712

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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: MOI CONSIDERS PEACEFUL RESOLUTION OF
TANUSEVCI STANDOFF

REF: SKOPJE 698

Classified By: P/E CHIEF SHUBLER, REASONS 1.4 (B) & (D).

SUMMARY

1. (C) The GOM is actively considering a non-violent approach to resolving the current standoff with former ethnic Albanian MP Xhezair Shaqiri, who is holed up in the village of Tanusevci on the Macedonia-Kosovo border (reftel) to avoid arrest on kidnapping charges. The approach includes offering Shaqiri amnesty from prosecution and safe passage out of Macedonia, in exchange for his pledge to refrain from involvement in Macedonian politics for at least five years. Although the plan needs further refinement, it is preferable to a more traditional, direct police action approach in which there could be civilian casualties in Tanusevci that could inflame ethnic Albanian sentiment on both sides of the border. End summary.

GOM APPROACH TO RESOLVING TANUSEVCI STANDOFF -- BACKING OFF OF DIRECT ACTION

2. (SBU) Ministry of Interior (MOI) Director of Police Todorovski briefed our DOJ police adviser and his OSCE colleague August 29 on planning for addressing the long-running standoff between the police and former ethnic Albanian MP Xhezair Shaqiri (aka "Commander Hoxha"), wanted on kidnapping charges. Shaqiri is holed up in the Macedonia-Kosovo border village of Tanusevci hoping to avoid arrest (reftel), and has issued inflammatory statements to the press from his hideout, including threats to launch a referendum calling for the secession of Tanusevci and its union with Kosovo.

3. (SBU) During a raid on Tanusevci in May of this year, police failed to capture Shaqiri, who was tipped off before the police arrived and fled to Kosovo. The bungled operation led to the resignation of Deputy Minister of Interior Refet Elmazi, a member of the ethnic Albanian DPA party, and to tensions within the ruling coalition. The Prime Minister refused to accept the resignation, however, and Elmazi remained in place.

4. (SBU) Media coverage of Shaqiri's wild rhetoric and threats to repel any police action against him with an organized group of armed ethnic Albanians has ratcheted up pressure on the MOI to take action. Local electronic media

erroneously reported the evening of August 30 that a police raid had been launched and repelled in Tanusevci, with several wounded on the MOI side. The reports were later countered by statements from Tanusevci residents insisting that Shaqiri and his cohorts had retreated to a nearby forest to fire their weapons and then claim that they had engaged in a firefight with police. President Crvenkovski has joined the fray by criticizing government inaction as a sign that the GOM is unable to control that territory. So far, the Interior Ministry has, judiciously in our view, resisted precipitate action.

AN ALTERNATIVE TO DIRECT ACTION

15. (C) As an alternative to direct police action, Todorovski said the MOI would attempt to exert psychological pressure (e.g., deploying police forces in the vicinity) on Shaqiri to get him to leave the village. If that failed, Todorovski said, he would ask OSCE and the EU Monitoring Mission to visit the village to relay an alternate MOI plan to Shaqiri. The OSCE and EU representatives would assure Shaqiri that no police action would be undertaken against him for the following four days.

16. (C) After the four-day "cooling off" period elapsed, an MOI negotiator would approach Shaqiri to offer him the following: safe passage out of Macedonia to Turkey and freedom from prosecution, amnesty for his followers (estimated at less than 30 men), integration of some of his followers into the Border Police, infrastructure improvements in Tanusevci, and a resumption of mixed ethnicity police patrols in the village. In exchange, Shaqiri would be expected to remain outside the country for at least five

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years and agree not to engage any further in political activity in the Tanusevci area.

17. (C) IC POLADs from the US Embassy, EU, OSCE, and NATO met August 30 to discuss the MOI's plan and agreed that, despite the positive nature of this non-confrontational approach, there should be no IC involvement in it. That position was conveyed to Todorovski, who said he understood the IC position but added that he hoped for IC support in the event he carried through with it.

ETHNIC ALBANIAN PARTIES PUT PUBLIC PRESSURE ON SHAQIRI

18. (C) In the meantime, early on August 30, we asked the leadership of the two major ethnic Albanian parties in Macedonia, opposition DUI and junior coalition partner DPA, to issue statements condemning Shaqiri's actions and characterizing them as harmful to stability in Macedonia and to ethnic Albanian interests specifically. DUI pledged to do so, and DPA later issued a strong statement to that effect. In its August 30 statement, DPA said the incidents being provoked by Shaqiri were "neither in the interests of Kosovar Albanians, nor in the interest of the residents of Tanusevci."

COMMENT

19. (C) We believe the MOI's cautious, patient approach is the right way to proceed. The press eventually will find other stories to cover, and the publicity firestorm lit by Shaqiri will die out. Although the MOI's alternative plan probably needs further refinement for it to work, Shaqiri could see it as the only way out of his dilemma. If not, it is unlikely the police will be able to resist much longer public calls for action to demonstrate its ability to enforce rule of law in Tanusevci. Indeed, this idea for near-term action to deal with Shaqiri contrasts sharply with what Todorovski told DCM and embassy officers on August 27, when he said the police would wait until snow falls in the Tanusevci area this winter, further restricting Shaqiri's room for maneuver. Given the possibility that police action could lead to

unintentional civilian casualties in that area, we will continue to encourage the government to plan their approach carefully, and to continue developing options for indirect action to resolve the standoff. End comment.

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